

Accession Number: 4  
Classification: Black Community  
Date: May 4, 1974  
Place: Evanston, Illinois  
Interview with: Robert (Bob) White Barbara Teising was present  
Interviewed by: Glenna Johnson and Thandie Myusi  
Language Used: English  
Observations: This interview was of a rather unusual nature. It was given while we were riding around Evanston in a car as Mr. White was pinpointing the black enclaves and the parameters of the black community for us. Thus its content is frequently disjointed and does not fall into a question-answer format much of the time.

Mr. White: (In front of Weiboldts) This used to be an oil refinery here at Weiboldt's and across the street were the houses, where the parking lot is now. Black people live in these houses.

1. Q. Was the oil refinery here first?

A. Yes.

2. Q. Were the homes that black people lived in, were they homes that white people had moved out of?

A. I would imagine so because they are pretty old houses--- they had been around here a very long time.

3. Q. Do you have any idea when this community appeared here or when Weiboldt's moved in and put the lot in there?

A. Weiboldt's used to be over on Davis. Let me ask my brother-in-law when we get over to Edna's house.

4. Q. Do you know when blacks began to move into what is now the parking lot? Was it before the depression, after World War I.?

A. About during and immediately after World War I.

5. Q. Was that black housing right up until Weiboldt's moved in?

A. Whites moved in there first but blacks were the last to live there.

6. Q. Was it a changing neighborhood pattern like today for example?







A. There was no such thing as a homogeneous neighborhood. It was like one or two white families would move into an area, or one or two black families would move into a neighborhood. It wasn't one family would move in and everybody would move out,

7. Q. It didn't happen like that?

A. Not at that time.

8. Q. (We are now along the canal banks approaching Ladd Arboretum. This is the area where the huge mounds of dirt used to line the canal that Mr. White spoke of in an earlier interview. Now it is beautifully landscaped with blooming flowers and trees throughout the area). Was this landscaping done during the depression as part of the Work Project Administration or is this more recent?

A. No. This is more recent and was done by the city. The city of Evanston leased this ground from the Sanitary District. This used to be a civil air defense landing strip during the Korean War. During the Second War they used to have GI homes here, little quanset huts all along here.

9. Q. When we were just going west along the canal which boundary of the black community were we on?

A. The North boundary. Now we are moving into the heart of the black community. This is Community Hospital here. Yes, now here is the new building, and there is the original structure.

10. Q. Do you remember Butler Sanitarium on Asbury Street?

A. I don't recall that, but Bill was talking about it the other night.

11. Q. Who is Bill?

A. Bill? That's my brother-in-law, Bill Summers.





12. Q. And Community Hospital dates back at least as long as you can remember?

A. Right.

13. Q. And was this area white at one time?

A. Well, there was no such thing as a neighborhood at that time. People just sort of lived. The white house there with the red shutters was the house I was born in. The canal travels in a big arch. This is where all the hills were. I made a mistake when we talked before. I told you that the hills went only to Howard Street. They went from Greenbay Road all the way to Devon. So that was the project they tore down.

14. Q. Does the canal start at Greenbay?

A. Oh no. It goes on and on, and feeds off the Lake.

15. Q. Do you know where the dirt was taken?

A. No I don't know where they took it, just that it was all removed.

16. Q. By truck?

A. Yes, by dozens and dozens of trucks. That church used to be just a hut, nothing but a hut. Then they built the church next to it. Just a bunch of guys, non-construction company, started building the church. We used to sit and watch them work. The little hut must have been built around 1934.

(Mr. White then drove through the neighborhood and showed us the houses where his white playmates used to live).

Mr. White: I used to remember when my Mother used to send us to the store. We could just cut across the fields because there were no houses behind this street. You could almost see from the store to my house. (He is speaking of Hartrey and to the East of there).

17. Q. When did this area come under construction?

A. In 1935, I'd say. We used to play football in this vacant





lot with the Afases.

18. Q. Now, Bob, we are on the West Side and you are pointing out to us that even though the area is where most blacks live, it was not a solidaly black area?

A. That's right. And that's true throughout Evanston too. Even though the rest of Evanston was mostly white, there were blacks living there too.

19. Q. Barbara asked you if there was ever a time that Evanston was all white. And you answered that there were always blacks here. What do you think made them come here?

A. If I remember correctly- talking to my Dad one time - Evanston was next to a big city and people gravitate toward a big city. And that's what brought a lot of Blacks to Evanston. There wasn't any one thing in particular. This area here used to be all swampy and marshy (still on the West Side) and they used to beg people to buy property out here and no body wanted any part of no swampy area. I remember that very well.

20. Q. Did the city reclaim the land?

A. No. People started buying the land, real estate people and started building houses. That's why so many of the houses look alike. Then people started moving out here. These streets were not here. As late as 1939 cabs would <sup>not</sup> drive you past Emerson Street because there was no pavement out here. People would have to walk beyond this corner (Emerson near canal) because of the big chuck holes, cabs wouldn't come down here.

21. Q. Did blacks live on the other side of the canal (Northwest Evanston)?

A. Yeah. Then but not now.

22. Q. Do you know why your folks moved to Evanston?

A. The same thing I said beofre. They gravitated toward the





city from South Carolina.

23. Q. That's interesting. I thought people from the southeast moved to New York and people from Mississippi and Alabama moved to Chicago.

A. Lot's of Evanston people originated in South Carolina.

24. Q. Did your folks settle in Chicago first?

A. I think the majority of people settled in Chicago first and only later moved to Evanston.

25. Q. Your parents included?

A. No. My parents came straight to Evanston?

26. Q. Did they have jobs before they came to Evanston?

A. They had a little farm in South Carolina. They didn't come together. They came here as little kids and met here.

Now that's the bridge I told you about that divided the East Side blacks from the West Side blacks.

27. Q. Were there socio-economic differences between East Side blacks and West Side blacks?

A. No, not really.

28. Q. Why the distinction?

A. Well---the rough necks kind of lived on the West Side.

29. Q. So there were social differences but not economic?

A. (no answer)

30. Q. You said that people who lived outside the nucleus in the black enclaves were primarily renters instead of land owners. Do you know why the landlords preferred to rent instead of sell their property outside the nucleus?

A. At that time there wasn't a big demand on selling homes because there was no one in the market for them. Nobody got





kicked out of homes then, because the landlord wanted to raise the rent \$45.00 or something. Rents just remained the same. It was a cheap economical way to live. It was a steady income for the landlords.

31. Q. Did your parents already have relatives here when they came?

A. No. They came on their own.

32. Q. Do you know if there was any one particular thing that made them come? Were they told that things were better in Chicago?

A. They were told that things were better in Chicago, that there was work, jobs to be had. This is the house my parents originally lived in. All my brothers and sisters except me were born in that house.

33. Q. Was that a one family house?

A. That was kind of a two family house, a duplex I guess you call it.

34. Q. What street is this?

A. Jackson Avenue.

35. Q. Were they buying there?

A. No. They were renting there.

(He drove us to Martin Luther King Laboratory School, formerly Foster School).

Now this is the school my parents went to and it's the school I went to. At that time it was called Foster School. Of course it's been remodeled a lot. It caught fire one time. The North end there is like what the old building was. The rest is remodeled.

36. Q. Do you know when it burned?

A. Yeah, let's see. Slim was in 6th grade. Slim is my oldest son. 5th grade. It must have been about 1960.





Now going back to our religious background, My father was Methodist. My Mother's family was Church of God,

37. Q. Do you know when Church of God was established?

A. I don't know. I went to Ebenezer and had no dealings with Church of God.

38.Q.We've heard practically a different story from each person on which was the first church in Evanston. Do you know?

A. (Laughter) I couldn't even begin to tell you. Edna would know. Just remember to ask my sister the same questions.

39. Q. In communities that are not "dry" people have bars that they hang out in when they get out of work. What did people do in Evanston?

A. It wasn't like that. I'll tell you and I'll show you. Evanston had bars on Howard Street and there were bars in Skokie, but blacks were not allowed in those bars. They had<sup>a</sup> little package good corner where you bought your liquor and drank in cars or in your home. It was the only place you could drink. Now right where that gas station is sitting there used to be a little tavern called Boulevard Inn. (Corner of McCormick and Emerson?) You could walk over and buy yourself a little package but you couldn't sit down and drink. There was one place out at the forest preserve called the Rabbit Farm. It was just a big building---it wasn't even a bar---where blacks could go in and drink. They sold booze there. As a matter of fact, during the war there was almost a riot here. A bunch of soldiers came down here to drink from Fort Sheridan, three white guys and one black





guy, all of them officers---pretty good ranking officers. And they went in there to drink and the bar keep refused to serve the black guy. Well, one word led to another and they got into a fight, and the bartender shot the black guy---shot a black soldier, didn't kill him, but he shot him. It almost caused a riot here because a lot of soldiers from Fort Sheridan came down and the black community was upset because they resented the place anyway, because you couldn't go in there and drink.

40. Q. How was it cooled down?

A. I don't know exactly. I guess just a lot of words got thrown around. A lot of time elapsed and people just sort of simmered down. There were MP's posted there for a long time to keep the soldiers quiet and there were police from Skokie that were just stationed there.

41. Q. They didn't change their policy though?

A. No. They didn't change their policy.

42. Q. Was there any social unrest during the depression?

A. No, not to my knowledge. No.

43. Q. Why not?

A. At that time people were just so concerned about making a living that they didn't have time to do anything else. To say why can't I do this, why can't I do that?

44. Q. It would just seem that the utter frustration of trying to live in those times would make people react violently?

45. Q. Behind my question is the idea that things during the depression were not substantially worse for black people than before the depression and as far as economic conditions go how do you separate the hardships from the people who perpetrate those hardships?





A. Well, the hard core hardship people---they were doing fairly well really---those were the people that were on relief. Relief paid their rent gave them all the food they wanted, and clothes. They did better than the people like my father who was working. We didn't get any of the fres fruit they could get. I remember this area as a kid. There weren't any houses. The sidewalks were here and the street was here but there weren't any houses. We used to come over here to roller skate because the sidewalks were so nice.

46. Q. Why was that?

A. I don't know. So I guess what I'm saying is that blacks were between Church Street and the Canal because there was nothing here. In this area there are about seven or eight white families on a block. But South of Dempster is about half and half

47. Q. Do you feel that this area South of Dempster is a changing neighborhood?

A. No. It's just holding steady.

48. Q. It seems that Evanston blows a lot of generalizations made about black and white settlement patterns.

A. It certainly does. White people in Evanston have always been used to seeing black faces. They don't pick up and run when a black moves in. The people you see changing are the ones who came here from somewhere else---they're not true Evanstonians.

49. Q. I wish you'd expand on that some more.

A. The blacks who did domestic labor lived in the northwest and the eastern part of Evanston and Rogers Park. The people who lived here were all just the same and did the same kind of work.





50. Q. And what kind of work was that?

A. City workers, police, some drove bus---that type of thing.

51. Q. You mentioned that there used to be factories here that aren't here now?

A. Yes, I'll show you where. There used to be a street car here that runs on the bus line now.

52. Q. Do you think your sister remembers the street cars?

A. Oh yes.

53. Q. Do you remember how much the fares on the street car were?

A. 7¢.

54. Q. How much were stamps?

A. 2¢, no 3¢, 2¢?---no. 3¢.

55. Q. Now were these built for the war? Or were they here prior to the war?

A. They were built for the war effort. Lot<sup>W</sup>s of blacks came into Evanston to work in them. Now they are all closed up. This area has always been known for jobs, for work in the area. They say that if there's no work in Chicago, there is no work anywhere.

(We pulled up in front of Edna White Summers' home. She is Bob's sister. She was our next interviewee).

End of Session.

